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Augusta businesses anticipate gains from Masters

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With just one month left before the 2011 Masters Tournament, Jugal Purohit sat down to do some math.

Masters Week can be a make-it-or-break-it time for hotel owners such as Purohit, when the economy decides how many nights guests will stay in town to watch the world's best golfers.

This year, the reservations he added up among his hotels let him breathe a sigh of relief. Of his five hotels, three are booked above 93 percent capacity between April 3 and 10.

The other two are booked in the 80 percent range, a 7-percent increase from last year.

"Believe it or not, I have no doubt the economy is showing up to be a little better," Purohit said.

As the people like hoteliers and caterers prepare for Masters Week business, many are seeing more activity than last year.

Robert Williams, owner of Roux's Catering on Jones Street, said his schedule is almost completely booked for this year's tournament.

His staff is finalizing appointments, setting up the hospitality lodge off Berckmans Road and handling last-minute calls for catering requests.

"The last couple of years, they were off years," Williams said. "This year we're definitely getting more bookings."

The corporate executives who use Masters Week to entertain clients are also booking more nights and longer stays than last year, which is a welcome surprise for Susan Smith's business.

Smith owns Susan Smith Golf Ventures, a service that makes all arrangements for its guests -- from securing the rental houses and catering to fetching another glass of Cognac or cigar for a client at the after party.

However, with luxury comes expense, and as the recession brought some dark days in 2008, Smith saw an unprecedented drop in her business.

She sent out extra fliers and letters to potential clients last year hoping for a better 2011.

The response, she said, gave her hope.

"Now 2011 is four times as large as last year," Smith said. "It's quadrupled. It's not where it should be. It's not even comparable for my best year, but I'm very optimistic."

Her optimism is echoed by University of Georgia economist Jeff Humphreys, who said at the university's annual economic outlook luncheon in Athens on Wednesday that Georgia's economy should grow 3 percent and add 40,000 more jobs this year.

It will be the first time in seven years that the state's economy has not fallen below the rest of the country's, according to the *Athens Banner-Herald*.

It's like how Purohit sees the hotel business these days.

"Last year they were scared, but now people are realizing customer care is a very big asset."

He was even ambitious enough to purchase an 18-seater Mercedes van to shuttle his Masters clients between the golf course and his hotels this year.

It's a move he said he would not have done if he didn't have hope for the economy.

"We're running like chickens with our heads cut off," Purohit said. "It's going to be a good year."